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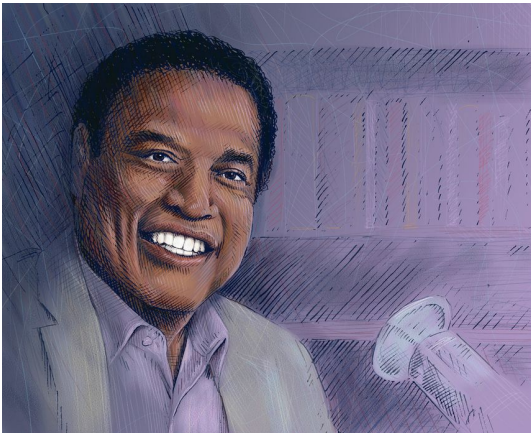
OPINION | THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

Could a Conservative Replace Gavin Newsom?

A quixotic effort to recall California's governor is suddenly gaining steam. And libertarian radio host Larry Elder is the front-runner.

By [Allysia Finley](#)

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Larry Elder

ILLUSTRATION: BARBARA KELLEY

What are the odds that California would elect a conservative Republican governor in the 2020s? Slim to none, one might have said. But that was before Larry Elder entered the room.

When the California Patriot Coalition launched an effort to recall Gov. Gavin Newsom in February 2020, their effort looked hopeless. It still seemed implausible in April 2021, when the secretary of state certified that the effort had enough signatures to trigger a vote. Most polls showed a majority or a substantial plurality opposing the recall, and no other high-profile Democrat entered the race to succeed Mr. Newsom if he is recalled. There was little enthusiasm for the Republicans who'd joined the race, including Caitlyn Jenner, former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer and John Cox, who lost to Mr. Newsom in 2018.

But suddenly it's a contest. Ballots for the Sept. 14 vote will start being mailed in the coming weeks, and three recent polls show Mr. Newsom is vulnerable. An Inside California Politics/Emerson poll this week found that only 48% of registered voters would

vote to keep Mr. Newsom in office while 46% would remove him, within the margin of error. On Wednesday Survey USA released a poll that showed Mr. Newsom losing the recall vote, 51% to 40%.

A California recall ballot has two parts. The first asks a yes-or-no question: Shall the officeholder be recalled? The second offers a list of successor candidates—46 have qualified in this recall. Each voter chooses one of them, and if the recall is successful, whichever candidate earns a plurality fills out the term.

Mr. Elder was a late entrant to the race, announcing his candidacy on July 12. He was motivated by “fire in the belly to see if I can do something . . . to move the needle in the right direction,” he told a reporter. He instantly emerged as a front-runner, polling 10 points ahead of the closest would-be GOP Newsom successor. (The new Survey USA poll has him slightly behind Democrat Kevin Paffrath, a 29-year-old YouTube personality.) That was before he even qualified for the ballot, which ended up requiring a trip to court.

He has name recognition as a radio host since 1993 and has been broadcast both locally and nationally. His current program, “The Larry Elder Show,” covers mostly politics with a focus on California. It has been nationally syndicated since 2016 and airs across California’s major media markets. He’s known for being plain-spoken but not strident.

Mr. Elder, 69, grew up working-class in Southern California—in a different world, as he describes it. “My father came to Los Angeles in 1945, right after the war. And he was able to work two full-time jobs as a janitor, cleaning toilets. He had a stay-at-home wife, my mother,” he says. “My father was able to save his nickels and dimes to buy a house in South Central that right now remains in the family, and according to Zillow, it’s worth \$600,000.”

In those days it was easier for low- and middle-income families to climb the economic ladder. “Somebody nowadays with an eighth-grade, a dropout education like my father could not duplicate the route from poverty to the middle class if he worked three or four jobs,” Mr. Elder says, “because the price of homes has gotten so outrageous—because of the stranglehold that the environmental extremists have on development contractors who otherwise would build more homes in California.”

Mr. Elder graduated from inner-city Crenshaw High School in 1970, then earned a bachelor’s degree from Brown University and a law degree at the University of Michigan. He practiced law for a few years, then started an executive search firm for lawyers before he found his calling on the air. He built his radio audience by discussing California problems that most local liberal media outlets ignore or treat in simplistic ideological terms. “I have talked about crime, about homelessness, about fire suppression, about the drought and shortage of water, about the rising cost of a home in California,” he says.

He describes himself as libertarian—which means liberal on cultural issues like same-sex marriage. His dad instilled an ethos of self-reliance and personal responsibility. “My father always told us, hard work wins,” he says. “You can’t control the outcome, but you’re 100% in control of the effort.” Like many young men, Mr. Elder rebelled against his father—but now credits him for overcoming a rough upbringing in the Jim Crow South and working menial jobs to support his family before starting his own business. Mr. Elder’s background helped sharpen his arguments against the welfare state and well-intended liberal economic policies—like the minimum wage, which he blames for hurting black communities.

“My ideas have been tested under fire. They’re common-sensical, and I think that that’s lacking here in Sacramento. This governor, Gavin Newsom, has imposed the most severe lockdown of all 50 states, and the results have been disastrous. Only about 50% of jobs have been recovered in California to pre-pandemic levels, whereas two-thirds of the national average have been recovered,” he says.

Mr. Elder ticks off numbers like a sportscaster. “There are 300,000 public-school teachers in California. It is estimated by virtually every expert I talk to that a minimum of 5% of them are incompetent. That’s 15,000 teachers walking through the corridors of our schools, educating our kids. Now, we wouldn’t put up with that with the LAPD”—the Los Angeles Police Department.

“There was recently a study that showed two-thirds of black parents do not want to send their kids back to the Los Angeles School District, and one of the reasons they cite is ‘systemic racism,’ ” he says. “What they mean is this: the worst teachers end up in the urban schools. They don’t end up on the West Side, they don’t end up in the Valley; the worst teachers end up in the urban schools. And black and brown parents are aware of this, and they want something done about it.”

Mr. Elder supports an initiative that the California School Choice Foundation may place on the November 2022 ballot to establish education savings accounts, allowing parents to use taxpayer dollars that would normally go to zoned public schools for private-school tuition, homeschooling and other education-related expenses.

California voters rejected ballot measures to establish private-school vouchers in 1993 and 2000. But Mr. Elder thinks the coronavirus school closures represent a turning point, or perhaps a breaking point: “Parents have been able to see for the first time the kind of instruction their kids are getting, and they’re not impressed.”

The pandemic shined a light on other problems, including crime and homelessness. “Under coronavirus, this governor has overseen the release of 20,000 convicted felons, many of whom were convicted of violent crimes,” Mr. Elder says. He faults a 2014 ballot measure, Proposition 47, which then-Lt. Gov. Newsom backed. It reduced the penalties for drug possession, shoplifting and other “victimless” crimes.

“You can now steal up to \$950 without being guilty of a felony if you get caught. If you get caught, you get a ticket as a misdemeanor,” Mr. Elder says. That feeds addiction, as many shoplifters support their drug habits by selling stolen goods. “And by the way, it’s not just \$950—it’s \$950 every single day, at every single place, which is why you’re finding places like Walmart, Target that are closing up—because they can’t make any money, because people are stealing. Or they’re cutting hours and hurting the very employees that used to work there.”

A Gov. Elder wouldn’t have the power to repeal Proposition 47, or for that matter do much of anything, on his own. But he says he’d use his “bully pulpit” to advocate reforms, including a suspension of the California Environmental Quality Act to increase housing development. “For the first time in this state’s history, we’re losing population,” he says. “It is not the millionaires and billionaires that Bernie Sanders complains about moving—it’s people making between \$50,000 to \$100,000 who cannot buy their first home.”

He’d also wield his veto pen aggressively. “One of the reasons I was reluctant to get into this race is because I thought [Democrats] could override whatever veto that I do,” he explains. But the Legislature hasn’t overridden a veto since Jerry Brown’s first stint as

governor, in 1979.

“Arnold Schwarzenegger, even though he was a semi-Republican, vetoed hundreds of bills. Not a single one was overridden. Because what happens is—you veto a stupid bill, you go public and you explain why the bill was stupid. And the next thing you know, the phones ring in the state senator’s office and the phones ring in the state assemblyperson’s office, and the constituents are saying, ‘What the hell are you thinking about?’”

So Democrats “are going to work with me, or they’re going to feel the heat. The other thing I can do is empower the Republican minority,” he adds. “I’m going to make it clear to the Democrats that if you don’t include buy-in from the Republicans to make these bills far more sensible, I’m going to veto them, and that’s going to make them a lot more sensible.”

By Mr. Elder’s lights, California’s Legislature could hardly be less sensible. It has moved sharply to the left despite voter-approved measures that created an independent redistricting commission and a jungle primary—process reforms intended to moderate partisan extremes. What went wrong?

Mr. Elder blames unions, which bankroll Democratic politicians and make them less accountable to voters. Mr. Newsom and anti-recall committees have raised some \$43 million with about 45% coming from labor organizations. Mr. Elder has pulled in \$4.5 million.

“Elizabeth Warren just cut a commercial for him, arguing that the recall was led by Trump supporters. At least she didn’t call me a white supremacist, which is what the Gavin team earlier said this was being driven by,” Mr. Elder says with a laugh. “After I got in the race, they dropped that rhetoric.”

Republicans make up only 24% of the state’s registered voters, but Mr. Elder observes that “2.2 million people signed a petition to recall this guy”—the governor—and surmises that “at least a quarter of them were Democrats or independents who had just voted for him two years earlier. Calling those people white supremacists and Trump supporters is insulting.”

Mr. Newsom seeks to repeat that claim in the Official Voter Information Guide, a brochure mailed to voters that includes statements from candidates. Mr. Newsom’s statement says the recall is “an attempt by national Republicans and Trump supporters to force an election and grab power in California” and says it would result in “handing power to Republicans and supporters of President Trump.”

The coalition that mounted the recall filed a lawsuit alleging that Mr. Newsom’s proposed official argument amounts to “a paid advertisement.” A Sacramento superior court on Wednesday rejected the lawsuit, saying Mr. Newsom’s makes a “type of exaggeration that is common to political debate and that is thus permissible.”

Challengers don’t directly face the incumbent in a California recall election, but Democrats appear worried about Mr. Elder all the same. If he brings out more Republican voters, that means more votes for recalling Mr. Newsom. The Democratic secretary of state moved to keep Mr. Elder off the ballot because he didn’t properly redact personal information on 300 pages of personal tax returns he submitted. Mr. Elder sued and won his ballot spot.

“People have asked me whether or not this is some sort of attack against Larry Elder,

whether or not it was racism. Well, the secretary of state happens to be a black female, and I've always said it's not racism that they were engaging it, it's 'face-ism,' meaning this particular face," he says. "I'm from the inner city. I'm a product of public schools. . . . I believe that they're afraid of my ability to explain these kinds of things in ways that Joe and Joanne Six Pack can understand, and in ways more effectively than Republicans have in the past." He says California Republicans have failed to connect the dots between liberal policies and problems like high housing costs, homelessness and failing schools.

Is the Golden State ready for a political turn? "I hope it's becoming more conservative, but I can't say that," Mr. Elder says. "All I know is people are fed up."

Ms. Finley is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

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